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AUTHOR Beale, Calvin L.
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ABSTRACT

Late in 1973 it became evident that the trend of population growth in the U.S. had turned toward rural and small town areas. Growth and migration rates for metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas were compared. Counties were classified by certain basic functional characteristics, and the trend was examined in those that were dominated by some feature or function. Principal source of current population data was the annual series of estimates for all counties conducted by the Census Bureau in cooperation with State agencies. Causal data such as the Social Security Administration's statistics on covered employment and on location of retired worker beneficiaries were also used. Findings included: from April 1970 to July 1974, the nonmetropolitan counties increased in population by 5.6%, while metropolitan counties grew by 3.4%; as measured by the rate of net migration, all but two States showed increased net retention or greater acquisition of population in their nonmetro areas in the 1970's as compared with the 1960's; the nonmetro counties that showed the most rapid growth were those that were termed retirement counties; the second most rapidly growing class of nonmetro counties was those where a senior State college was located; and counties with high dependence on farming were still having net outmigration though on a far lower pace of outmovement than in the 1960's. (NQ)

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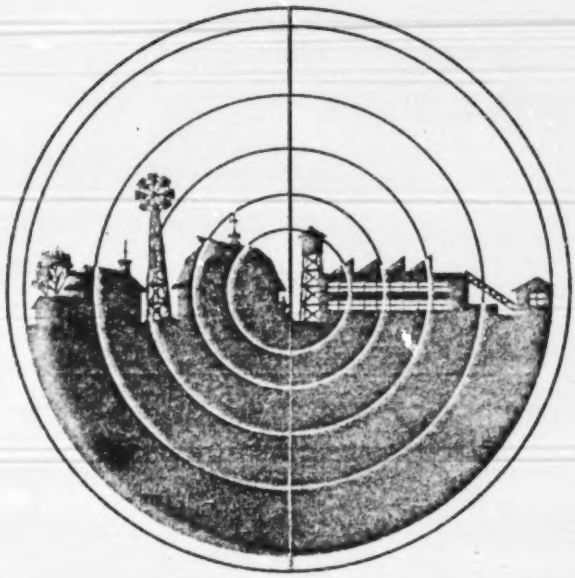

November 15, 16, and 17, 1976

Washington, D. C.

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RC009676

Communications and Rural America

Purpose

In April 1976, the Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) of the U.S. Congress issued a staff report entitled *The Feasibility and Value of Broadband Communications in Rural Areas*. The purpose of the conference is to extend this effort by:

- Considering a broader range of communications technologies which might be used to meet rural needs.
- Further examining the question of whether system demonstrations aimed at achieving economic viability are needed and if so, identifying the kinds of demonstrations which might be undertaken.
- Further examining whether rural interests have been adequately considered in existing Federal communications policy.

The outcome of this effort will be a report incorporating the information and points of view presented at the conference.

Congressional Interest

The conference is being held in response to a request for additional information on rural communications from Senator Herman Talmadge, Chairman of the Senate Agriculture Committee, as approved by the 12 member Technology Assessment Board of the U.S. Congress. Senator Pastore of the Senate Subcommittee on Communications subsequently joined Senator Talmadge in support of the conference. It is intended that the conference will be of value to the U.S. Congress in its deliberations on communications policy.

Conference Dates and Organization

The conference will convene for 3 days, November 15–17, 1976, with about 60 invited participants. For the first 2 days, participants will be equally divided among three panels which will meet in parallel. Each panel will concentrate upon a specific topic addressed in the OTA report as follows:

- **Panel 1.** Rural Development and Communications.
- **Panel 2.** Technology, Economics, and Services.
- **Panel 3.** Federal Policy.

On the third day, participants from all three panels will meet together to exchange and synthesize findings and explicitly address the question of rural system demonstrations.

Cosponsoring Institutions

The National Rural Center is cosponsoring Panel 1 (Rural Development and Communications). The Aspen Institute is cosponsoring Panel 3 (Federal Policy).

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A FURTHER LOOK AT NONMETROPOLITAN POPULATION GROWTH SINCE 1970

by

Calvin L. Beale
Economic Research Service
U. S. Department of Agriculture

Paper presented to the Annual Meeting of
Rural Sociological Society
New York City, August 1976

A Further Look at Nonmetropolitan Population Growth Since 1970

Calvin L. Beale
Economic Research Service
U. S. Department of Agriculture

The fact that the trend of population growth in the United States had turned toward rural and small town areas began to become public knowledge late in 1973. It took a while for the information to be widely distributed and for it to be accepted, for it went against the grain of much that economists and others in research or policy positions believed probable. By now it has been widely reported in the news media and seems to be part of the public's general stock of information. The purpose of this presentation is to give an updated assessment of the trend and of the circumstances that are associated with it. 1/

The simplest way to show the trend is to compare growth and migration rates for metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas. From April 1970 to July 1974, the nonmetropolitan counties of the United States increased in population by 5.6 percent, while metropolitan counties grew by 3.4 percent (table 1). Neither of these rates is especially high, for the birth rate has been low almost everywhere. But with the possible exception of a brief period during the heart of the Great Depression, we do not appear in the modern history of our country ever to have had a previous

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1/ For an earlier and fuller discussion of the subject see C. L. Beale, The Revival of Population Growth in Nonmetropolitan America, ERS-605, Economic Research Service, USDA, June 1975.

time when nonmetro population growth rates exceeded metro rates. From 1970 to 1974, a net of 1.6 million people moved into nonmetro counties. By contrast, 3.0 million net outmigration took place from these counties in the 1960's, and an even larger amount in the 1950's. County population estimates for 1975 are available for 32 States at the time of writing, and show a continuation of the 1970-74 pattern. I expect the net movement nationally into nonmetro areas to be about 1.9 million for 1970-75.

It is my experience that people who are cautious or skeptical about the trend want to know at least three things. Are the data relaible? How widespread is the phenomenon? Couldn't it just be an increased rate of sprawl out of metropolitan areas into adjacent nonmetro territory?

The principal source of current population data is the annual series of estimates for all counties that the Bureau of the Census now makes in cooperation with State agencies. There is simply no fool proof method of estimating population change for counties in intercensal years, and some of the estimates will undoubtedly be proven incorrect by the next census, even as to direction of change. But the average quality of the county estimates is good (as can be judged by their degree of correspondence with special censuses that are taken) and has improved with the addition of residential data from the Internal Revenue Service since 1973. I am prepared for the possibility that the current estimates may overstate nonmetro populations to some extent, but it is not conceivable that the figures are yielding a wrong signal at the national level. Interview

data from the Current Population Survey show the same pattern of growth, although at more modest levels. Furthermore, available causal data, such as the Social Security Administration's statistics on covered employment and on location of retired worker beneficiaries, confirm the population data and are based on records rather than estimates. Beyond this, one can always go and see for one's self. Many local journalistic accounts document the change, and in my travels I have yet to visit an indicated turnaround county where the local officials were not aware of the trend occurring.

As measured by the rate of net migration, all but two States show increased net retention or greater acquisition of population in their nonmetro areas in the 1970's as compared with the 1960's. The two exceptions are Rhode Island where the only nonmetro county had a military base closing, and Connecticut, where the State's two nonmetro counties continued to attract population but at a reduced rate. In the 1960's, 36 States experienced nonmetropolitan outmigration. This number is down to 8 in the 1970's. Thus, the new trend of population change in nonmetro areas is very widespread, affecting every region and subregion of the country.

The third question, concerning metropolitan sprawl, is best answered by looking separately at those nonmetro counties that are adjacent to metro areas and those that are not. The adjacent counties contain slightly more than half of the total nonmetro population and their population increased by 6.2 percent from 1970-74. This rate of growth is

somewhat higher than that of the nonadjacent counties (which was 4.9 percent), and has increased since the 1960's. So there is an adjacency effect, as one might logically expect. But it is not an either/or situation. Both adjacent and nonadjacent classes of nonmetro counties have had a migration reversal. The force of the reversal has actually been stronger in the more remote nonadjacent class than it has in the adjacent group. Numerically the reversal amounts to an average of 369,000 persons annually in the nonadjacent counties compared with 307,000 annually in the adjacent counties. 2/ As a result, there is less difference in the migration pattern of the two classes of counties today than there was earlier, although the adjacent group still has the higher rate of growth.

My basic approach to drawing inferences from the data about the nature of the new trend has been to classify counties by certain basic functional characteristics and examine the trend in those that are dominated by some feature or function. In this approach, the nonmetro counties that show the most rapid growth are those that can be termed retirement counties. The designation is made on the basis of 1960-70 trends, and excludes the additional retirement counties that are now developing, but the results are impressive. In the 360 nonmetro retirement counties total population grew by 14.5 percent from 1970-74, with

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2/ These numbers represent the difference between the average annual net migration for each adjacency group in 1970-74 compared with the annual average of the 1960's.

a net inmigration of 932,000 people. This is a rate of growth of more than 3 percent per year. The inmigration to these counties was more than half of total net inmigration into all nonmetro counties. But essentially all retirement counties gained in total population. Thus the rest of the country contains nearly all of the 600 nonmetro counties that have lost population, as well as others that have grown. It should be stressed that many of the retirement counties have other sources of growth than retirees, such as recreation businesses or manufacturing. Although we all nominally understand that there are more older people than there used to be and that retirement plans have become more generous in both money and age of eligibility, I do not believe we have fully anticipated the potential implications of these developments on population distribution. Most retired people do not move. But those who do move go disproportionately to nonmetropolitan locations, especially areas accessible to water (whether lake, reservoir, or ocean), scenery, or a favorable climate. They create business and employment, yet are not constrained by the need for employment themselves.

The second most rapidly growing class of nonmetro counties is those where a senior State college is located. These counties include 9.0 million people, are basically exclusive of the retirement counties, and grew by 7.1 percent from 1970-74. Like the retirement counties, they were already having population gain in the 1960's. The pace has increased in the 1970's, but there is suggestive evidence that it may have slowed since 1973 with the end of the military draft and the general peaking out of college enrollment rates.

In the 1960's, one of the main economic trends was the decentralization of manufacturing. In that decade, there was little manufacturing growth nationally, but a substantial shift of plants to small city or rural locations took place. The most cited reasons for the shift seem to be utilization of underemployed nonmetro female labor force, lower wage rates, better worker attitudes, less unionization, availability of cheap land, improved transportation, and flight from urban ills in general. In some parts of the country the increase in manufacturing jobs was truly dramatic. For example, in the 23 counties of Tennessee that lie on or west of the Tennessee River (exclusive of those that adjoin Memphis) manufacturing employment rose by 98 percent in the 1960's on a base of 32,000. In 26 counties of northern Arkansas--both Ozarks and northern Delta--the growth was 70 percent on a base of 24,000.

Often this growth took place in areas that had a comparatively small initial proportion of workers in manufacturing and that were simultaneously losing farm employment heavily. Thus the impact of the manufacturing growth on population retention in the 1960's is somewhat masked, for a majority of it did not occur in counties already having a large industrial base where additional nonfarm jobs would automatically be reflected in net employment and population gains.

If one looks at the record of counties that now have a high dependence on manufacturing, such counties (defined as those where manufacturing comprised 30 percent or more of all jobs in 1970) had 4.6 percent population increase from 1970-74. This is higher than their growth of the

1960's, and represents a turnaround from outmigration to inmigration. But it is distinctly below the rate of growth being observed in counties with less than 30 percent dependence on manufacturing. Manufacturing comprised 50 percent of all growth in nonmetropolitan employment in the 1960's. But, the subsequent slackening of manufacturing and the surge in trade, services, and other sectors (except government), has seen manufacturing jobs amount only to 3 percent of nonmetro job growth from 1970 to 1976. 3/

As might be expected, counties with high dependence on farming are still having net outmigration. Those with 30 percent or more dependence as measured by 1970 industry group of workers, had only .2 percent growth from 1970-74 and 17 thousand net outmigration. Even so, this is a far lower pace of outmovement than in the 1960's, and counties that continued to have this degree of involvement in the production phases of farming contained just 1 million people in 1970, less than .5 percent of the total U.S. population. The agricultural employment base is now so small that its trend can have relatively little further effect on the total trend of nonmetro population change.

To me, one of the most interesting and significant aspects of the recent trend is the complete shambles that it has made of the former strongly positive association between density of population and growth. If one classifies nonmetro counties by persons per square mile, as in

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3/ Unpublished data compiled and adapted by the Economic Research Service from State employment security agency estimates.

table 1, it is immediately apparent that in the 1960's pre-existing high density was almost a guarantee of population growth, and very low density was associated with population decline and heavy outmigration. In the 1970's, the highest rate of growth has occurred in the counties with the lowest density, rather than the highest, and there is little difference among other classes. This finding is also consistent with the fact that if counties are grouped by size of largest town, the completely rural group (with no place of 2,500 people) shows the highest recent growth.

Here is convincing--even startling--evidence of a rapid shift down the scale of residence that involves the most remote, least settled, and least urbanized parts of the country. I can think of nothing in the literature of the 1960's that foresaw such a change in the association of scale and density with growth.

This feature leads me to note a distinction among the metropolitan areas that is sometimes overlooked in the metro-nonmetro dichotomy that characterizes so much of the public discussion of the trend. If one groups metro areas by size class, those of less than 750,000 population are found to have had increased net inmigration during the 1970's. Only above this size is the movement into the metro areas typically reduced or negative. The small and small-medium sized metros are showing the same increased attractiveness to population growth that the nonmetro areas are showing. Thus the major point of inflection from the trend of the past is up within the ranks of the metro areas. The nonmetro reversal is the most extreme aspect of a larger trend.

Table 1--Population change by metropolitan status and selected county characteristics

Item	Number of counties	Population					Net migration			
		Number			Percentage change		1970-74		1960-70	
		1974	1970	1960	1970-74	1960-70	Number	Rate 1/	Number	Rate 1/
	No.	--- Thou. ---			--- Pct. ---		Thou.	Pct.	Thou.	Pct.
Total United States	3,097	211,392	203,212	179,323	4.0	13.3	2,076	1.0	3,001	1.7
Metropolitan status: 2/										
Metropolitan counties	628	153,930	148,809	127,191	3.4	17.0	461	.3	5,959	4.7
Nonmetropolitan counties	2,469	57,463	54,404	52,132	5.6	4.4	1,624	3.0	-2,958	-5.7
Adjacent counties 3/	969	29,780	28,022	26,116	6.3	7.3	1,010	3.6	-705	-2.7
Nonadjacent counties	1,500	27,683	26,382	26,016	4.9	1.4	604	2.3	-2,253	-8.7
Entirely rural counties	623	4,618	4,353	4,548	6.1	-4.3	190	4.4	-353	-12.2
Characteristics of nonmetro counties in 1970:										
Counties with 10 percent or more net inmigration at retirement ages 4/	360	8,653	7,554	6,340	14.5	19.2	932	12.3	624	9.8
Counties with a senior State college	187	9,031	8,434	7,463	7.1	13.0	323	3.8	91	1.2
Counties with 30 percent or more employed in manufacturing	638	20,143	19,257	18,193	4.6	5.9	356	1.8	-746	-4.1
Counties with 30 percent or more employed in agriculture	331	2,062	2,057	2,305	.2	-10.7	-17	-.8	-412	-17.9
Population density per square mile in nonadjacent counties										
150 and over	15	1,176	1,124	1,020	4.6	10.2	17	1.5	-10	-1.0
100 to 149	35	1,929	1,842	1,699	4.8	8.4	18	1.0	-73	-4.3
75 to 99	61	2,781	2,674	2,568	4.0	4.1	20	.7	-170	-6.6
50 to 74	127	4,298	4,099	3,990	4.9	2.7	84	2.1	-313	-7.8
25 to 49	351	7,764	7,412	7,270	4.8	1.9	176	2.4	-541	-7.4
10 to 24	405	5,681	5,412	5,562	5.0	-2.7	177	3.3	-584	-10.5
Less than 10	506	4,054	3,820	3,907	6.1	-2.2	111	2.9	-561	-14.4

1/ Net migration expressed as a percentage of the population at beginning of period indicated. 2/ Metropolitan status as of 1974. 3/ Counties adjacent to Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas of 1974. 4/ Counties with specified 1960-70 net inmigration rate for white persons 60 years old and over, 1970. Source: U.S. Census of Population: 1970 and Current Population Reports. U.S. Bureau of the Census.

Press reports on the new trend have occasionally carried back-to-the-farm headlines that had no basis in the content of the story. But there are a couple of agricultural aspects that need mentioning. First is the not-well-enough-known fact that since 1970 the decline in younger farmers has stopped and the median age of farmers is dropping. Persons under age 35 solely or primarily self employed in agriculture rose by 35 percent from 1970-75 as measured by the Current Population Survey. The departure of farmers over 60 increased and median age fell from 53.1 years to 50.4 years.

I have visited agricultural officials in about 20 counties in several States in 1976 and in almost every case have gotten field confirmations of the trend, usually emphatic confirmations. Noneconmic considerations related to attitudes and values are given almost as often as are economic factors as motivating factors in the increased number of young farmers. The result is to introduce more young farm families into the countryside despite some continuation of the trend of farm consolidation. Secondly, in less commercial farming areas, there is an undeniable trend of entry into farming of people with nonfarm backgrounds. This back-to-the-land phenomenon is difficult to quantify, but is commonly reported in news stories and is very much in evidence in areas such as the Ozarks, northern New England, the Upper Great Lakes country, the Blue Ridge mountains, and parts of the Far West. Failure rates are almost certainly high, but some net accrual to the rural population occurs.

Allied to this aspect of the overall trend is the reported trend of occupancy of former farm homes. In the same field visits referred to above, I have consistently had it reported that the practice of demolishing former farm homes--that was so common a few years ago--has changed. Such homes are now commonly rented or bought with 5 or 10 acres by people who work in towns (whether metro or nonmetro).

Trend data on towns per se are available only through 1973 and are not as reliable as for counties, at least among smaller size places. But a tabulation of the Census Bureau's estimates for 1973 (not shown here) shows nonmetro towns of 10,000 or more people increasing in population by little more than half the rate of the rest of the nonmetro population since 1970. This is consistent with the growth pattern for counties classed by size of largest place or by density, and with the diminished rate of growth in nonmetro urban towns that was found in the 1960's. In many respects the nonmetro towns are experiencing in a micro way the same trends as metro central cities. That is, there is a decay of the central business district, growth of suburban shopping malls, and a dispersal of people out into the surrounding countryside or villages. The towns continue to annex land and people in States where the laws are permissive, but they find it increasingly difficult to reacquire in annexable areas as many people as they lose to areas too distant to annex. In a very real sense the current trend of population distribution is one of renewed rural residential growth--open country and village. A majority of it is occurring in counties that have no places of 10,000

population, and it is especially pronounced in counties that lack any town of even 2,500 people.

As a result, there is a strong likelihood that the total rural population may increase when the next census is taken. In the past two generations, so much growth in rural areas has become urban in character and reclassified as such, that there has been essentially no net increase of the rural population. I am rather dubious that we could ever go above 60 million rural people, but I think we are now advancing toward such a level.

Presentation of these trend data leads logically to questions about the future. I confess that the older I get the more skeptical I become about demographic projections. The record--both as to fertility, total population, and distribution--ranges from poor to terrible. Yet the demand for projections and the comparative painlessness of making them in the age of computers combines--like Shaw's view of marriage--the maximum of temptation with the maximum of opportunity. I simply do not believe that we can foresee societal behavior well enough to say with any confidence how long the current shift of growth patterns to smaller scale communities will last or how far it will go. Beyond stating that I do not envision the end of great cities or urban dominance, I will content myself with saying that the current distributional trend is real and substantial (and not just a transient and negligible aberration) and that it has substantial momentum which seems likely to continue at least into the next decade.

As I see the current complex of forces that produce the trend, essentially all of them favor a continuance over the middle term. I would cite the comparatively favorable economic condition of nonmetro areas as reflected by growth of jobs and reduction of the metro-nonmetro income gap; the absence of much further displacement from farming; the revival of mining; continued growth of a retired population oriented toward recreational or climatically favored areas; the downscaling residential aspects of the environmental-ecological movement, buttressed by certain nature-oriented and anti-materialistic elements of the youth revolution; the unfavorable image of the great cities in such areas as crime, drugs, pollution, race conflict, school troubles, and fiscal matters; the near elimination of many former rural-urban gaps in material conveniences of living, such as water supply, plumbing, heating, electricity, roads, and communication; the high cost of metropolitan housing; and the emergence of an adequate system of post-high school education in nonmetro areas.

The major potential problem that I foresee is the matter of gasoline costs and supply. The new trend of population is not energy conservative. Rural people use considerably more gasoline per capita 4/ and have less in the way of public transportation alternatives during an emergency.

4/ Erhardt O. Rupprecht, "Impacts of Higher Gasoline Prices on Rural Households." Paper presented at annual meeting of American Agricultural Economics Association, August 1975.

What would happen if there were another oil embargo of greater length? What would happen if the price of gasoline assumed European levels?

A second potential lessening of the nonmetro migration could stem from the low birth rate of the last decade. Fewer families in the coming years will have an incentive to seek smaller communities out of concern for the welfare of their school-aged children--a motivation that is fairly commonly encountered today.

A final consideration in viewing the overall trend is to note that it has to be put in world context. Demographic turnarounds of this magnitude rarely occur in national isolation. The present trend is international in character. I sense that it is further advanced here than elsewhere, but slowdowns in urbanization can be measured in a number of the most advanced nations. 5/ I had no sooner published on the subject than I received an article by investigators in Sweden on the return to small towns in that country. Social scientists have given little thought to the probable settlement pattern in modern nations beyond the urbanizing period. Once modernization proceeds to the point that rural-urban disparities are relatively eliminated, and urbanization ru nes to the point that the urban environment is impaired, is there any further need for or likelihood of additional massing of people? The answer may be "no".

5/ John M. Wardwell, "Reversal of Metropolitan and Nonmetropolitan Growth Patterns: Equilibrium or Change?" Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Population Association of America, Montreal, April 1976.

I realize that some would say that the present trend is nothing but an urbanization of life in rural areas, whatever the location. To some degree this is undoubtedly true. Indeed this society once heard a presidential address on "The Urbanization of Rural America". 6/ But the new trend cannot be simply explained away semantically. It represents a major departure from what we publicly anticipated, and it will have a variety of consequences. Whatever the style or content of life of former urbanites in the rural and small city environment, the setting is no longer metropolitan urban for them, and the difference is consciously meaningful to them.

The advantages of urbanization are erodable and not without limits in societies where rural areas are no longer isolated and backward, or retarded by an urban-oriented value system. Subtly but surely, I think we have entered a transition in population distribution that does not make us a rural nation again, but that greatly modifies the vision of unbridled mega-scale urbanism that seemed to dominate our perceptions a few years ago.

6/ Charles E. Bishop, "The Urbanization of Rural America: Implications for Agricultural Economics", Journal of Farm Economics, December 1967.